
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Speaking Competence in Morocco: Challenges and Innovative Pedagogical Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is one of the fundamental skills in a language. In this respect, this study aims to explore the speaking difficulties that Moroccan EFL high school students face and the strategies that teachers use to help their students overcome them. The study also seeks to answer the following questions: first, what do EFL high school teachers think about their students' speaking abilities? Second, what are the difficulties that Moroccan EFL high school students encounter in their speaking activities? And third, what are the appropriate strategies that Moroccan EFL high school teachers use to overcome those difficulties? The data of this study has been collected via a questionnaire administered to 100 teachers from all over Morocco. The analysis of the questionnaires has revealed that the teachers are aware of their students' speaking difficulties and they have mentioned some of them. They have also provided some strategies that they use to help their students surmount these difficulties.

KEYWORDS

Speaking, Speaking Competence, speaking difficulties, strategies, EFL learners.

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1. Introduction

Like most languages, English is divided into four skills which are as follows: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Speaking is considered to be one of the fundamental skills alongside with listening in language learning due to the important role it plays in communication situations, and the fact that people refer to those who know a language as speakers of it (Ur, 1996). Spoken language production is often considered one of the most difficult aspects of language learning (Brown & Yule, 1983). Therefore, scholars have been trying to do research in this area and come up with various solutions to overcome difficulties that accompany the learning of this skill. Due to the importance of speaking skills, teachers should approach it carefully and provide as much time as needed to teach it.

2. Literature Review

Investigating how the speaking skill is dealt with in an EFL classroom is an issue that needs further examination. Because it may give language teachers a better idea about some of the difficulties that students face and the strategies or techniques that they should use in order to communicate. However, when it comes to the Moroccan context, we can clearly notice the very low performance of Moroccan EFL high school students in speaking activities because of many difficulties. For that reason, we believe that teachers need to have a deep understanding and a clear vision of the difficulties that encounter their students and try to adopt alternative ways to enhance students' performance in speaking activities in the Moroccan context. Therefore, this paper aims to achieve three main objectives:

- The first one is to explore the perceptions of Moroccan EFL high school teachers regarding their students' speaking abilities.
- The second one is to investigate the main difficulties that Moroccan EFL high school students encounter while developing their speaking abilities.
- The third one is to shed light on strategies that teachers use to deal with these difficulties.

The study then intends to answer the following questions:

- 1) What do Moroccan EFL high school teachers think about their students' speaking abilities?
- 2) What are the difficulties that Moroccan EFL high school students encounter in their speaking activities?
- 3) What are the strategies that teachers use to deal with these difficulties?

Based on the research questions we hypothesize that:

- The strategies that the EFL teachers use in their classes are useful and sufficient to overcome learners' speaking difficulties.

There are many Studies that were carried out to identify the difficulties that hinder students' speaking skills development. Park and Lee (2005) conducted a study to examine the relationship between language learners' anxiety, self-confidence and speaking performance. The participants were 132 Korean college students who were enrolled in English classes. The outcome of this study indicated that the level of anxiety negatively affected students' speaking performance. MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels (1998) conducted a study on the effect of self-confidence on oral performance. The results of their study revealed that learners' willingness to communicate was partly determined by their self-confidence, in other words the more the learner is self-confident the more willingness to speak he shows. Feyten (1991) conducted a study to see if there is a relation between listening ability and foreign language proficiency, between listening ability and foreign language listening comprehension skills, and between listening ability and foreign language oral proficiency skills. The results showed that there is a significant relationship between listening ability and foreign language proficiency, between listening ability and foreign language listening comprehension skills, and between listening ability and foreign language oral proficiency skills. Bozorgian (2012) conducted the same study and came up with the same conclusion that is there is a close correlation between the listening ability and the foreign language skills. Lukitasari (2008) carried out a study on students' speaking problems in a speaking class. The participants were the first semester students of Muhammadiyah University of Malang in Indonesia. The outcome of this study was some of the difficulties that students faced such as "inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation and mother tongue use." The study also revealed that the students' low performance was also due to not mastering the three elements of speaking namely vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Nazara (2011) studied the perceptions of students on EFL speaking skill development of the English teaching study program of FKIPUKI Jakarta. The results showed that all students believed that speaking is very important; however, some students find it difficult to speak because of the stress and classmates' mocking. The researcher concluded by pointing out that there is a need to create friendly and facilitating classroom atmospheres.

3. Methodology

This study is by nature exploratory; it makes use of quantitative method of research. Google forms is used to collect data. The participants of this study are 100 Moroccan EFL high school teachers from different Moroccan high schools. 58 teachers are females while the remaining 42 teachers are males. 38 teachers' age is between 22 and 25 years old, while 40 teachers' age is between 26 and 45 and the rest of them 22 are above 45 years old. Concerning their teaching experience, 58 participants have been teaching English for a period that is between 1 to 10 years, whereas the rest 42 teachers have a teaching experience that is above 10 years. The instrument that is used to gather data for the present investigation is the questionnaire. It is distributed to 100 English high school teachers in different cities in Morocco.

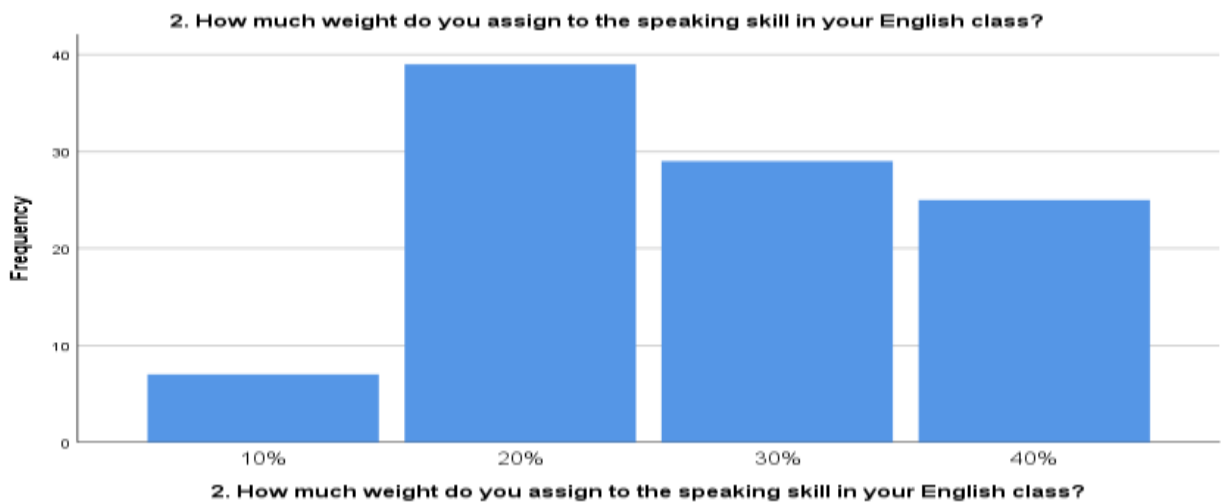
The researcher followed many steps in order to collect reliable and valid data. The researcher, first, administered the questionnaire to 100 participants. Most of the participants were helpful and showed great motivation and readiness to participate in this study. The questionnaire contains 8 questions. Question one, two, three and four require teachers to provide some of their background information (gender, age, university level and teaching experience). The fifth and the seventh questions are yes/no questions. In the fifth, teachers are asked if they teach speaking in the classroom while in the seventh they are asked about whether their students face any speaking difficulties, if they answer is yes, they are required to tick the appropriate choice(s) among some proposed options, namely: large class size, lack of vocabulary, lack of self-confidence, lack of interest, pronunciation, anxiety, shyness, fear of making mistakes, poor listening practice and poor grammar. The sixth question, teachers are asked to state how

much weight they assign to the speaking skills in the classroom. The eighth question, teachers are requested to choose some strategies that they use to overcome students' speaking problems. After collecting data from participants, it was coded and inserted into SPSS, and was analyzed using multiple statistical descriptive and inferential statistical tests based on the research questions, hypothesis and the nature of the data to be analyzed using frequency tables, correlation, and Regression Analysis.

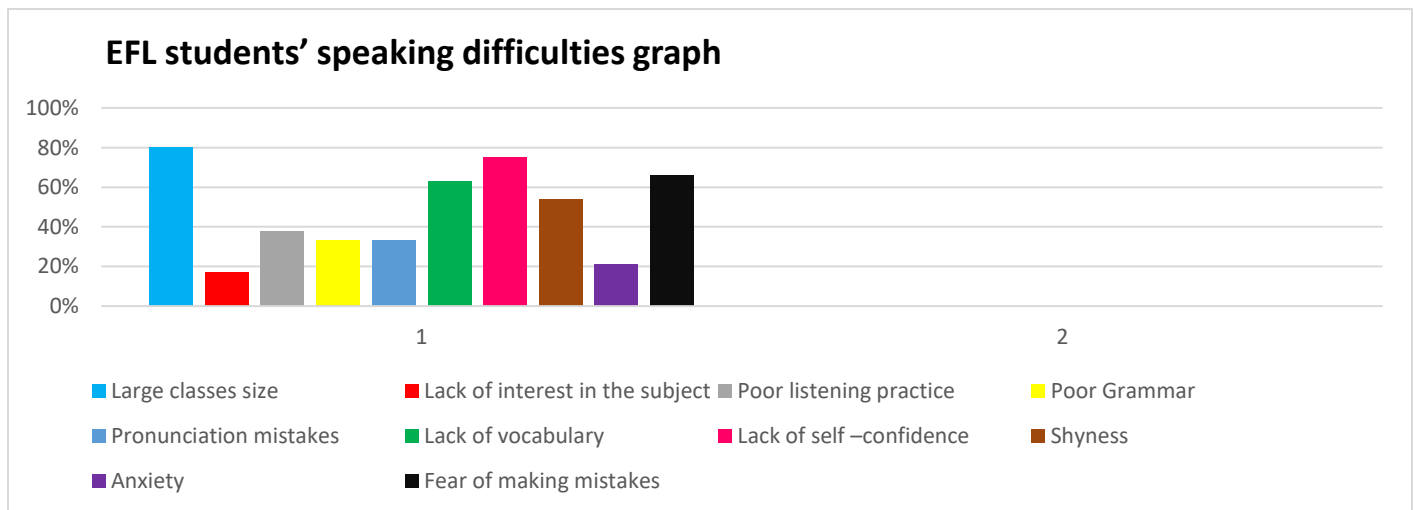
4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

This section deals with presentation and analysis of the data. It provides a description of the results that were obtained from the questionnaire that was administered to 100 Moroccan high school teachers. It is presented in graphs and analyzed in terms of percentages and frequencies. The first question in the questionnaire asked teachers whether they teach speaking in the classroom. All the participants answered 'yes'; they stated that they teach speaking in the classroom. See appendix. The second question is about the weight teachers assign to the speaking skill in their EFL classes. For the second question, the participants' answers varied. 38% of them stated that they assign 20% of the course to teach speaking skills in their classes, while 30% of the teachers believe that 30% of the weight should be assigned to the teaching of speaking. 25% of the participants say that 40% is the right weight that should be assigned to speaking in the classroom. Furthermore 7% of the participants emphasized that 10% is more than enough to be assigned for teaching speaking in the classroom. See the bar graph below.



The third question is about speaking difficulties that EFL students encounter inside the classroom. All the participants revealed that their students suffer from difficulties that hinder their speaking skill development. See the appendix. The next graph will demonstrate the most common difficulties that EFL high school students encounter as revealed by the participants:



According to the results shown above in the diagram, 80% of the participants said that large class size is the direct reason behind student's unwillingness to learn how to speak English in the classroom. Which means that when the classroom is crowded, students

are unable to take their turns to participate in classroom discussion. The second difficulty that 75% of the participants agreed on is lack of self-confidence. In addition to this, 67% of the participants stated that fear of making mistakes is one of the difficulties that hinder students' speaking development. Furthermore, the problem of lack of vocabulary was selected by 63% of the participants and believed to be one of the difficulties that hinder students' speaking skills. More importantly, 54% of the teachers think that shyness is also one of these major difficulties. Also 38% of the participants agreed that the problem of poor listening practice is among the other suggested difficulties. Poor grammar and pronunciation were both equally selected by 33% of the participants while 21% of the participants opted for anxiety. Finally, 17% stated that lack of interest in speaking prevents the progress of students' speaking skills. Some participants also said that the students are reluctant to speak because of many other difficulties namely: the use of mother tongue, fear of personality clash in discussion activities, students' awareness of the fact that all the exams are written and finally lack of background knowledge. Some participants also said that the students are reluctant to speak because of many other difficulties namely: the use of mother tongue, fear of personality clash in discussion activities, students' awareness of the fact that all the exams are written and finally lack of background knowledge.

4.1.1 The last question is about the most appropriate strategies that teachers use to help their students overcome these difficulties.

The last item of the questionnaire asked the teachers to choose the most efficient strategies that they use to help their students overcome the difficulties that they encounter while speaking in the classroom. What follows is a presentation of those strategies. Some teachers said that in order to help students surmount their speaking difficulties they must be motivated by using some techniques and activities such as creating appropriate atmospheres in the classroom 74%, and using games, flashcards, pictures and authentic materials, and role-play 72%. While others used classroom presentations and discussions 72%, warm up and brainstorming activities 80%, providing positive feedback to the students, giving them rewards 67%, encouraging them to read more so as to enrich their vocabulary 70%. Other teachers stated that they focus more on fluency rather than accuracy by convincing students that making errors is a normal thing in learning, and by not correcting them every time they make errors or mistakes, and by prompting them whenever they are stuck in speaking 60%, and play some errors of students on a record inside the classroom.

Hypothesis 1:

- The strategies that the EFL teachers use in their classes are sufficient to overcome learners' speaking difficulties.

In our theoretical model the independent variable is the strategies used by EFL teachers and dependent variable is Learners' speaking difficulties.

The correlation between strategies used by EFL teachers and the difficulties that Moroccan EFL learners face is $0.733 > 0.05$ which means that there is no correlation though this later is significant. That is to say, those strategies are useful but they are not sufficient. We need other strategies to overcome those difficulties that the EFL learners face in their speaking.

4.1.2 Regression Analysis

Linear regression analysis was used to test our main hypothesis. Results indicated that there is no correlation between the strategies used by EFL teachers and the difficulties that face Moroccan EFL learners ($\beta = 0.503, p > 0.05$). Table 1 shows the reported beta and coefficient of determination values. These results don't support Hypothesis 1 for depicts that the strategies the teachers use are useful and sufficient to overcome the difficulties that Moroccan EFL learners face.

Model	Coefficients ^a					
	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	
1	(Constant)	-.573	.503		-1.138	.258
	all_Strategies	.857	.081	.733	10.616	.000

a. Dependent Variable: all difficulties

4.2. Discussion

This section will deal with discussion of the main results of the study as shown in the previous section. The discussion of the findings will be done with reference to empirical studies conducted on the same issue tackled in this paper and organized in terms of research questions.

4.2.1 What do Moroccan EFL high school teachers think about their students' speaking abilities?

It is reasonable to think that most EFL students encounter difficulties while learning how to speak English. The findings of this study prove that all Moroccan EFL high school teachers believe that their students encounter some speaking difficulties inside the classroom. The findings do not contradict what has been presented in the literature review, all the five studies (Feyten (1991), Park and Lee (2005), MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels (1998), Lukitasari (2008), Nazara (2011)), that are mentioned in the last part of the review of the literature, admit that students face difficulties when it comes to speaking English in the classroom.

4.2.2 What are the difficulties that Moroccan EFL students encounter in their speaking activities?

There are numerous difficulties that Moroccan EFL learners face in the process of learning how to speak English. The findings of the study present some of the most common difficulties namely: large class size, lack of interest in the subject, lack of vocabulary, poor grammar, poor listening and speaking practice, pronunciation mistakes, shyness, anxiety, fear of making mistakes and lack of self-confidence. Most of the teachers agreed on the fact that large class size is the most common speaking difficulty. As Celce (2001) stated, large class size prevents students from speaking because they don't have the chance to participate in classroom discussions. Moreover, teachers identified lack of self-confidence as the second most common speaking difficulty that Moroccan EFL learners face. The findings are consistent with what MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels (1998) found in their study, which was conducted on the effect of self-confidence on oral performance. The results of their study revealed that learners' willingness to speak was partly determined by their self-confidence. This latter is a very crucial factor that needs to be taken into account if a teacher desires to develop the speaking abilities of their students. In addition to what have been said, the third most agreed upon difficulty is fear of making mistakes. This result is in accordance with what Ur (2000) has said about fear of making mistakes, which is one of the main barriers that hinders students' speaking development and make them reluctant to speak inside the classroom. This is exactly what Moroccan EFL high school teachers confirmed. In the findings of this study, teachers also said that lack of vocabulary is another difficulty that prevents students from speaking inside the classroom. This outcome supports the study conducted by Lukitasari (2008), who, came to the conclusion that one of the problems that face students in developing their speaking skills is lack of vocabulary. Another difficulty that was found to be affecting Moroccan EFL learners' speaking development is shyness. This result supports Penny Ur's (2000) claim that some students' reluctance to speak is due to the factor of shyness of getting attention that they will get when they speak. Teachers also said that poor listening practice is another factor that causes for students some speaking problems. This outcome is in agreement with what Feyten (1991) found when correlating the speaking skills with the listening skills, he said that in order to achieve speaking proficiency, students must have good listening skills. Bozorgian (2012) who came up with the same results later on replicated this study. Teachers chose equally bad pronunciation and poor grammar as two other difficulties that hinder students' speaking development. Lukitasari (2003) conducted the same study and came up with the same results. He said that students' weak performance in speaking is due to bad pronunciation and poor grammar. According to the teachers' view, anxiety is also another difficulty that hinders students' speaking development. This result supports what Park and Lee (2005) said about anxiety, they said that it affects negatively students' speaking development. And finally, teachers said that lack of interest in the subject can also cause students to be reluctant to speak and thus be unable to develop their speaking skills. Thorbury (2005) said that if students are not familiar with the topics discussed inside the classroom, they will be reluctant to speak. To sum up, the findings discussed above correspond to a great extent to what exists in the literature.

4.2.3 Do you use strategies that help your students overcome these difficulties? if yes, choose the strategies that you use.

This question asks Moroccan high school EFL teachers to choose the strategies that they use to help students surmount their speaking difficulties. Most of the teachers suggested motivation and tolerance of errors as the two most appropriate strategies that they use to help students develop their speaking skills. As Harmer (2001) said motivation is some kind of internal force that pushes someone to achieve things. Motivating students to speak inside the classroom can be incorporated in many activities such as role plays, problem-solving activities, discussions, pictures, flashcards etc. In addition to this, teacher can divide the class into groups and pairs, this technique motivates students to speak more with their group members. As Harmer (2001) said, group work gives students the opportunity to speak and encourages them to be more cooperative, interactive, and helps them develop their decision-making abilities. Tolerance of errors is also an important technique that teachers said they use; they said that they focus more on fluency rather than accuracy; they tell their students not to care about mistakes, the aim is just to speak and practice the language. Teachers also said that they take the role of prompters so as to help their students continue speaking and appreciate what they have to say. Harmer (2006) said that prompting is a good technique that teachers can use to help their students whenever they are stuck while speaking. In brief, the conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the strategies that the teachers use are similar to what has been found in the literature.

5. Conclusion

100 EFL high school teachers participated in this study. The participants were administered a questionnaire that consists of eight items aiming at exploring the difficulties that students encounter in speaking and the strategies their teachers employ to help them overcome these difficulties. Concerning the difficulties pointed out by teachers: the issue of large class size, lack of self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, lack of vocabulary, shyness, poor listening practice...etc. The researcher also aimed to elicit

some strategies that Moroccan EFL high school teachers use to help their students overcome those difficulties. Most of the teachers said that they use motivating activities and techniques to encourage students to speak.

6. Pedagogical implications

The research paper suggests that teachers should consider the speaking difficulties that their students face as a very serious issue, which will affect their learning. In addition, teachers should use other strategies besides the activities found in the literature in order to help students overcome the speaking difficulties. Since speaking is one of the main elements of a language, teachers should prioritize teaching speaking skills and use whatever available resources to help their students develop their speaking skills

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